

# OPERA NEWS

---

Features

**October 2010 — Vol. 75, No. 4**

[http://www.operanews.org/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2010/10/October\\_2010.html](http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2010/10/October_2010.html)

## The Constant Gardener

For years, William Christie's work with his superlative ensemble Les Arts Florissants has changed the face of Baroque and early music presentation. ADAM WASSERMAN talks to the conductor, who makes his long-awaited Met debut next month leading *Così Fan Tutte*.



Jonathan Kent's production of Purcell's *Fairy Queen*, presented by Christie and Les Arts Florissants at BAM in 2010

© Stephanie Berger 2010



**William Christie**  
**at the Mignot 2010**

[http://www.operanews.org/uploadedImages/Opera\\_News/2010/10/Features/ConstantGardenerChristieToClg10110.jpg](http://www.operanews.org/uploadedImages/Opera_News/2010/10/Features/ConstantGardenerChristieToClg10110.jpg)

William Christie  
at the Mignot 2010

"I'm not very sure of myself, and maybe that's a strong point," says conductor William Christie. "I kind of put myself in question a lot. I am not sort of" — a deep sigh and long pause — "rolling around in my contentment." It's not an admission one expects to hear when interviewing Christie. Three decades ago, as an American harpsichordist in Paris, he founded his ensemble, Les Arts Florissants, and he has since gone on to become a towering figure in the fertile and continuing revitalization of the Baroque repertoire. Despite his professed diffidence, Christie has inspired — if not educated directly — several successive generations of historically informed singers and musicians, revived the long-forgotten works of Marc-Antoine Charpentier and recorded close to 100 CDs and DVDs. As an impresario, he continues to cultivate an intrepid theatrical aesthetic. He appears to be one of the most deliberate, self-possessed, accomplished musicians working today, so one wonders why a conversation with him seems punctuated by suggestions of self-doubt and flickers of still-palpable ambition. What, if anything, could this man at the center of a Baroque and early-music empire still have to prove?

Part of it may be that Christie has predicated much of his career on an endless, probing curiosity and obsessive sense of perfectionism. He is an imposing, patrician figure whose attention to detail is the stuff of industry legend — a tireless, occasionally curmudgeonly taskmaster who demands exactitude from his players and singers. At the same time, he's been known to encourage musicians to relax their reliance on often skeletal Baroque scores for freer, more dynamic interpretations inspired by a work's literary rhetoric. Perhaps as a result, audiences and critics alike are wont to describe Les Arts Florissants's performances of works by composers ranging from Monteverdi to Campra to Handel in terms of how modern they sound. For many, Christie has served as something of a chaperone to another musical century, and he plainly isn't one to bear his responsibility lightly. Chatting with him on this occasion, though, one perceives a mellowing in his voice — a tone of ease and acceptance suggesting that, while he may not be willing to rest on his laurels, he may be nonetheless looking forward to the prospect of some rest.



The maestro in Paris in 2008

© akg-images/Marion Kalter 2010

It's early July, and Christie is speaking by phone from Paris between performances of American choreographer/ director Trisha Brown's new double bill of Rameau's one-act *Pigmalion* and excerpts from *Hippolyte et Aricie*, which the conductor and his ensemble are taking on a tour across the continent. Anyone familiar with Les Arts Florissants's dramatic oeuvre will register that no small amount of consideration goes into selecting the stage directors brought into the organization's fold, and Christie's thoughts on Brown's methods reveal the level of his commitment to delivering a total theatrical experience. "I'm living something which I haven't been able to do very often in my life," he says — "that is to say, to provide singers to a choreographer, to teach them how to dance and sing at the same time, which is pretty exciting." Brown's style — perhaps best known to operagoers through her stagings of *Winterreise* and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, both starring Simon Keenlyside — is essentially "rhetoric without language," Christie notes. "It's highly stylized, gestural. It's been hard for the singers, because sometimes she asks them to do things that I think are physically challenging and perhaps can somehow distract them from the musical side. It's taken a long time to put together — as a lot of good things do — but the result is really powerful. Something's being said in a very *new* way."

Next month, Christie makes a belated Met debut pacing performances of the company's revival of *Così fan Tutte*. Long an exponent of interpreting Mozart in the context of period performance (Les Arts Florissants's 1995 recording of *Die Zauberflöte*, featuring Natalie Dessay's Queen of the Night, remains a revelation), Christie relishes *Così* particularly for its ensembles, which he calls "the last great statement of what was the great art form of the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth century — the Italian madrigal." The Met's cast includes the Despina of Danielle de Niese and the Alfonso of Wolfgang Holzmair, both of whom took part in Christie's first outing with the opera in Lyon in 2006. Obviously, the Met orchestra has neither the extended history he shares with Les Arts Florissants nor the specialization in historical-performance practices that are his *métier*. "I think the most important thing is to follow," he says when asked what stylistic particulars he hopes to convey. "Conductors come into a house like the

Met with respect — that is to say, respect for an orchestra that has an extraordinary tradition as a lyric orchestra, and respect as well for the way pieces are presented. I'm not an iconoclast in the sense that I've still got lots to learn. And you can learn so much from an orchestra that's been together for a very long time — an orchestra that's evolved as well. The Met has a frantic schedule, let's face it. You've got to understand that you don't have the luxury of weeks on end — you've got hours. You've got to really hone down your language and refine your rehearsal techniques, whereby every minute counts."

Christie is likely to feel less rushed when he returns to the Met during the 2011–12 season for the seemingly bespoke project being billed as "Enchanted Island" — a contemporary *pasticcio* held together by a new *Tempest*-inspired text written by British director/translator Jeremy Sams. The Improbable theater company's Phelim McDermott and Julian Crouch will stage the work. According to Christie, the evening will feature "big, wonderful snatches of great Handel, but also Vivaldi. And we're going to have some storm scenes, and perhaps some dance sequences from Rameau." The pitch of Christie's enthusiasm makes clear that he's not one to let the supposed orthodoxies of Baroque performance practice get in the way of a good time.



Deborah Warner's staging of *Dido and Aeneas* for Les Arts Florissants at the Opéra Comique in Paris, 2008,

with Lina Markeby (Second Woman), Malena Ernman (Dido) and Judith van Wanroij (Belinda)

© Elizabeth Carecchio 2010

Christie and Les Arts Florissants have long been a known and revered property in other New York venues. Last March, the Brooklyn Academy of Music presented a Christie-curated Baroque opera festival, which featured as its centerpiece Jonathan Kent's sublime staging of Purcell's *Fairy Queen*. Kent's production, a full-fledged Restoration spectacular that extracted Shakespearean fancy from a seemingly bottomless cabinet of curiosities, was one of the lushest, most purely enjoyable performances of the New York season. That production also seemed to instigate for Purcell's semi-opera the same revelatory ovations that greeted another Les Arts Florissants sojourn at BAM more than two decades

ago: for many, the ensemble's 1989 run of Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Atys* remains a seminal discovery that revealed nothing less than an alternate musical universe to a generation of concertgoers looking to escape the last vestiges of a suffocating High Modernism. In fact, the memory of those performances proved so enduring to one businessman, Ronald P. Stanton, who first saw the opera on a lark at the Opéra Comique in 1989, that he has underwritten a revival of Jean-Marie Villégier's opulent production to the tune of several million dollars. The performances — funded by what Christie calls "the great American philanthropic tradition" — will take place as part of the Brooklyn venue's 2011 season. The production will travel throughout Europe as well, amounting to a cornerstone offering of Les Arts Florissants's bustling thirty-second year.

For his part, Christie confesses to some initial unease about the prospect of revisiting the regal 1676 *tragédie en musique*. "I was afraid of the comparisons, frankly. Critics can be notoriously finicky and I think silly and sometimes unpleasant about things," he says. "If they've seen it once, well yes, maybe it's not like it was ten years ago. But now twenty-five years have gone by and yeah ... I think that I feel safer. That's a cowardly thing to say, but I miss it." He points out that it's not pure nostalgia motivating his desire to return to the work but rather the possibility of approaching *Atys* in a different way: "You live these pieces according to your experience, according to your emotions, according to your age, according to so many things."

Perhaps the strongest impetus for reviving *Atys*, Christie notes, is the current prevalence of voices on the Baroque and early-music scenes that can do the work justice. "Right now, at this point in my life, I've got this curious amount of talent hanging around — an enormous number of young singers coming out of the conservatories. And we've been able to fill the roles pretty well — in fact, wonderfully well."

If there's any individual responsible for the lion's share of emerging young musicians interested in Baroque music, it may well be Christie. In recent years, he has become increasingly emphatic about his ensemble's involvement with educational initiatives. Participants in Le Jardin des Voix, Les Arts Florissants's decade-old young-artist program, are given an intensive schooling in Baroque practice before embarking on an international tour with the orchestra. (Christie notes that his Jardin des Voix singers will be integrated into the performances of *Atys*.) Between 1982 and 1995, he held a professorship at the Paris Conservatory, and in 2008 the ensemble launched Arts Flo Juniors, a training and professional integration program that began with the Conservatoire National de Musique et de Danse de Paris and the Conservatoire National de Région de Paris and has since expanded to include other institutions. In addition, this past season Les Arts Florissants inaugurated an association with the newly established historical-performance division of the Juilliard School that has resulted in master classes and one-on-one training and mentoring.



Christie conducts a master class at Juilliard, 2010  
© Richard Termine 2010

"The Juilliard experience is one of the most important things we're doing," Christie says. The ensemble's recent educational efforts have been a matter of both necessity and aspiration. "Are we going to include some of these people in our productions? You bet! The talent level is absolutely staggering," Christie says, noting that he's resolutely opposed to most conservatories' regulations about students accepting outside professional engagements. "I've profited, how do you say, *shamelessly*, from my teaching experience. But then there's a deeper sort of need I think as well on my part. I love teaching."

Whether or not he's willing to admit it outright, Christie is clearly a man mindful of his own legacy and what may lie beyond it. He became a French citizen in 1995 and as such is currently five years past the country's official age of retirement. During our interview, he mentions his age, sixty-five, no fewer than three times; in recent years, Les Arts Florissants has appointed two associate conductors, who have been given increasingly choice conducting assignments and look poised to usher the ensemble into decidedly new directions. Scottish tenor Paul Agnew, long associated with Les Arts Florissants and a principal voice in many of its most influential recordings and performances, first conducted the orchestra with 2007 presentations of Vivaldi's *Vespers*. Meanwhile, thirty-three-year-old British conductor Jonathan Cohen led well-received performances of Ferdinand Hérold's opéra comique *Zampa* in 2008 and has since gone on to pace the ensemble in performances of Purcell, Haydn, Mozart and Gluck.

Christie's mentorship of many of the top players and conductors in the increasingly crowded sphere of Baroque music changed some time ago from mere artistic tutelage into something resembling an unwitting cottage industry. A number of the ensemble's alumni — including Christophe Rousset, Emmanuelle Haïm and Marc Minkowski — have gone on to found their own ensembles, frequently overlapping in repertoire with Les Arts Florissants. "I say to these people, 'Look, you know, when you start feeling the need to fly away and leave the nest for good — for goodness sakes do so!' What that does is encourage a very, very strong sense of competition, which is good," says Christie, trying to sound as magnanimous as possible. "I know damn well that we've got to be very good, because there are a lot

of other very talented youngsters. And that's good. I think it makes for a very exciting milieu here." In noting that Agnew and Cohen are now considered "permanent colleagues, with a long-term sort of commitment," Christie hints at something of a decisive effort to put his estate in sterling order — to write the terms of a future for Les Arts Florissants that may not include him but will still bear his stamp, a kind of musical *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée*. If Christie is, as he says, insecure and ambivalent about his own impact, one can't help wondering if it's due to the unforeseen effects that his own influence and efforts may have on Les Arts Florissants and the larger modern Baroque movement. If, thanks to Christie's efforts, specialization in Baroque and early music has entered the operatic and classical-music mainstream, spawning as many emulators as admirers, where might that leave his orchestra? Christie seems alternately inspired and equivocal — perhaps even a little weary — about the prospect of keeping up with this beautiful monster largely of his own making.

Christie is also eager to compose some music of his own: "I've got enough material I think now to do something fairly significant." More than that, though, he says that he'd love to see Les Arts Florissants become ensconced as "a permanent fixture, a permanent thing in the French culture. There's precedence for it — the Orchestre Colonne, the Orchestre Pasdeloup — but it would be marvelous to see an early-music group that I think has changed the face of French music since the war. I've got a choir and I've got an orchestra that does between eighty and a hundred concerts a year — they need work. I want my group to be stimulated in as many possible ways, and, bringing Paul and Johnny into the picture, we're going to be able to maintain the volume of good work. Les Arts Florissants and myself — I mean we've been able to do things, you know? But I think the most important thing is to continue and to look forward, always." ■

Send feedback to [OPERA NEWS \(mailto:onlineinfo@operanews.com?subject=Website%20Feedback\)](mailto:onlineinfo@operanews.com?subject=Website%20Feedback).